

Desperate House-execs

So, moms, you thought the boardroom was stressful?

November 21, 2004

By Patricia Kitchen

It was 6 p.m. on Halloween Eve and Andrea Forstadt's two young daughters were clamoring for supper - one wanted ravioli and a turkey burger, the other scrambled eggs and wheat toast.

"I had five pots on the stove and a 3-year-old screaming at my knees," says Forstadt, 35, when her husband sauntered in and asked what she'd decided to wear to a costume party that evening.

"I'm going as myself," said the stressed-out former advertising and marketing executive. "A desperate housewife!"

She was alluding, of course, to ABC's popular new Sunday night satirical soap of that name, which features a character whom stay-at-home moms find riveting - Lynette Scavo. She's a former executive who's overwhelmed at home raising her four children under age 6 - and we'll give the infant a break here, but to say the other three are Godzilla munchkins would be so charitable. Take the time they painted a little classmate's face with blue finger paint. Or the time they refused to buckle their seat belts, which led to Lynette's leaving them by the side of the road.

Yes, she's the character Forstadt thinks of with a smile as she's "scrubbing chocolate pudding off the wall." Friends are even starting to call to tell her of their own "Lynette moments."

And whether you find Lynette to be a poster child for at-home moms or a mommy dunce, she does highlight some issues women face as they choose to leave the for-pay work world for the one at home. The struggle to control the uncontrollable. The loss of professional identity. The image others have that their new job is a cinch.

In one scene, Lynette's husband, about to baby-sit the brood, tells her it'll be a piece of cake - after all, they're JUST children! (Our girl, though, goes on to sugar the little tykes up, so dad will get their full force.)

The most recent episode highlighted the friction between executive moms and long-term PTA moms. The reigning passive-aggressive director of the school play looks to eliminate violence from "Little Red Riding Hood," as well as Lynette's sons' roles as oak trees. But, calling on the direct communication style she learned in the boardroom - as well as a hit of her kids' ADD medication to help her stay up all night sewing costumes - our desperate housewife wins the day. She ends up telling the other mom that next year, "we're going to do Bambi and his mother is going to take a slug to the head ... and you're going to like it."

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Of course, some real-life moms find her depiction to be "demeaning," says Lisa Spiegel, a founder and director of the Soho Parenting Center, a family counseling service in Manhattan. Yes, there is an "adjustment" when women leave their for-pay jobs, but they do get up to speed. Lynette is such an exaggeration, Spiegel says, that she can be seen as divisive and not making "women feel proud of staying at home."

And one viewer wrote on the show's message board: "Please, someone find a way to make that mother more competent. It is unbelievable that a woman who has left a high-powered job could possibly be that incompetent at running a household."

Others, of course, find her to be a catharsis. And some might just revel in the sight of a smart woman who's doing so much worse than they are.

For Forstadt, the show "makes you feel like you're not alone." Especially on those days you "want to pull your hair out of your head or call a headhunter." Her own home life is far from the chaos depicted on the show and it's hard to imagine that it could be anyone's reality, she says. "But I can completely relate to her feelings."

Take all the scheduling conflicts. Or the day Forstadt's younger daughter switched off her mom's cell phone during a play date, as the school nurse left message after message saying her other daughter, 6, was sick. (The nurse eventually reached her husband at work in Manhattan.)

"I was in control as an executive," Forstadt says. But in 2003 when she left her job in the city and the family moved to Woodbury, she says, she learned that you can't "apply the same discipline" at home. "You have to be flexible and roll with it."

While some may see "Desperate Housewives" as negative and shallow, Marisa Thalberg, mother of a daughter about to turn 4, says she finds it "good fun. It's a soap." It shows the struggles of a complex, intelligent, non-June Cleaver type of mom, who is sometimes fulfilled by her choice to stay home and sometimes not.

"It's healthy for working and nonworking women to see. I think Lynette is an interesting icon for both," says Thalberg, a marketing executive in Manhattan and founder and president of Executive Moms, a Manhattan-based peer-support, networking and resource group.

So, how would career, parenting and other experts advise Lynette to get her act together? They'd tell her to get some diversity in her life by volunteering or finding part-time work. Also to let up on herself. Women who make the move from office to home need to "consider this like any other career change," says Christine Walker, author of "The Smart Mom's Guide to Staying Home," (Trafford, \$15.95.)

You need to allow yourself a transitional period, says this former sales executive with Tiffany, where you learn about your new workplace, dress code, skills to develop. "Everyone has had a first day in a new job. ... You may not be that amazingly successful early on, so allow for a transition and learning curve."

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And Spiegel speaks to an issue raised by a number of viewers on the message boards - that Lynette

is not setting and enforcing limits with her kids. "She's not tapping into her power enough. She's very overwhelmed by them." And this is characteristic of many parents who look to "appease in the moment." Those who are "more worried about making them happy than about forming their character."

It looks to Spiegel that Lynette is not finding much joy from her kids - though, admittedly, she says, in the name of comedy, some things need to be sold down the river.

And, of course, that joy is the reason so many real-life moms choose to stay home. Take Forstadt, who says the pleasure of being with her kids, "far outweighs the craziness." When she was working outside the home, she felt her daughters "bottled their emotions" during the day with the caregiver and "unloaded when I got home." But she says she's now seeing them at their best.

One of the biggest lessons she's learning? "Not to judge other mothers. They're all created equal and are doing the best they can - working or not working."

Please send e-mail to pkitchen@newsday.com.